

Testimony of Arthur J. Laffin

To Repeal the Death Penalty in Connecticut (in support of SB 1035 and HB 6425)

**503 Rock Creek Church Rd., NW
Washington DC, 20010**

My name is Art Laffin and I am a murder victim family member. I am also a Hartford native who currently lives and works at a Catholic Worker house in Washington, D.C.

Over eleven years ago my younger brother, Paul, was murdered in Hartford, Connecticut. On September 20, 1999, as Paul was leaving Mercy, Housing and Shelter where he had worked for ten years, he was stabbed to death by a mentally ill homeless man, Dennis Soutar, who often frequented the soup kitchen at the Shelter. My family and I were consumed with a sorrow that defies words. I still can't believe what happened to my kid brother. My family and I and all who knew Paul still grieve his senseless horrific death. My brother truly gave his life for those he served.

Dennis Soutar was ultimately deemed incompetent to stand trial for killing my brother. Had he been deemed competent to go to trial, and was convicted, he could have faced the death penalty. He is now serving a 60-year sentence at the Whiting Forensic Division of Connecticut Valley Hospital in Middletown.

After Paul's highly publicized death, my dear late-Mom and I, through God's amazing grace, appealed to the public to show mercy toward Dennis Soutar and to pray for him. We recalled that Jesus said: "Blessed are the merciful for they will obtain mercy." "Forgive and you will be forgiven." As Jesus is being executed He says to his persecutors: "Father forgive them." My Mom and I were able to meet with members of the Soutar family--Dennis' brother and sister-in-law -- and asked them to convey to Dennis our prayers for his healing. I pray for Dennis Soutar's healing and that he will experience God's forgiving love. I also ask everybody here today to pray for Dennis' healing.

What happened to my brother is not uncommon, and has tragically occurred elsewhere in Connecticut and across the country. It is a societal disgrace that some of the mentally ill homeless, who fall through the cracks and are not properly cared for, end up committing violent lethal acts. During my eulogy for Paul, I asked that all necessary resources be made available to provide a continuum of care for Dennis and all other mentally ill homeless so that future tragedies like what happened to my brother might be averted.

My prayers go out to all family members throughout our society and world who are grieving the loss of loved ones who have been murdered. I know their pain and pray for their healing.

There are many people who believe that we have to kill the murderer in order to bring closure for the victim's family. I believe that killing people who kill will never bring true closure and healing. Killing Dennis Soutar will never bring my brother back. It will never bring healing or closure for me and my family. The pain of Paul's murder will always be there.

Certainly, individuals, and even corporations and governments who commit violent acts must be held accountable for their actions and make restitution to the victims' families. But we must never sanction killing those who kill, no matter how brutal the crime. Rather, we must always seek the way of restorative/transformatiive justice.

As of mid-February 2011, 1,242 people have been executed in the United States since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976. I ask: how can we break the cycle of violence and killing? How can we promote healing for everyone who has experienced the unspeakable pain resulting from murder? I believe that the best way to honor my brother is to work for the prevention of violence, not to replicate it. I believe the way to true healing is not through vengeance and retribution, but through compassion and reconciliation. Martin Luther King, Jr., who opposed the death penalty, said that "capital punishment is society's final assertion that it will not forgive." I totally agree with Archbishop Desmond Tutu who declared: "there is no future without forgiveness." Ultimately, I oppose the death penalty because it violates God's command: "Thou shalt not kill."

I also oppose the death penalty because:

- * It is racially biased.
- * Innocent people are sentenced to death. Since 1973, 138 people have been released from death row across the U.S. because of evidence showing their innocence. I've come to know a number of these people, and some are now my good friends.
- * Poor defendants do not receive adequate legal representation.
- * It costs more to execute a person than it does to impose a life sentence. The General Assembly's Office of Fiscal Analysis estimated that the death penalty costs the state of Connecticut four million dollars a year to maintain.

Fifteen states in the U.S. no longer have the death penalty. Montana and Illinois are on the verge of ending the death penalty. Over 95 countries worldwide, including all European countries, have abolished the death penalty.

Two years ago the Connecticut House and Senate **passed** a bill that would have repealed the death penalty, but it was **vetoed** by former Governor Rell. **It's time to stop wasting scarce resources on an unfair system that risks giving death sentences to innocent people and fails to meet the needs of victims' families.**

I pray that Governor Dannel Malloy will sign new repeal legislation making Connecticut the sixteenth state to end the death penalty.